

## **Interplay Between the Bible and Culture: A Path to Sound Biblical Hermeneutics in an African Context**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the relationship between the Bible and culture in enhancing a relevant Interpretation of the Scripture. The biblical events did not exist in a vacuum but within a cultural context depicted by the languages and customs employed. Hence, Biblical Interpretation cannot be done in a cultural vacuum; the Bible's content and the reader's context are shaped by specific cultural dynamics, which cannot be avoided in achieving sound biblical hermeneutics. The study examines the Bible as a product of Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman cultures while addressing how contemporary interpreters' cultural backgrounds influence their understanding of the biblical text. The study advocates a balanced approach to encourage a more contextualised biblical hermeneutic. This involves distinguishing between cultural norms specific to the ancient world and the universal theological teachings that transcend their original settings. The paper analyses fundamental hermeneutical principles, such as historical-critical methods, cultural exegesis, and contextual theology, to provide tools for separating cultural aspects of the Bible from its core messages. The paper argues that recognising the interplay between the Bible and culture is essential for a transformative reading that remains true to its original intent while relevant to diverse audiences in contemporary settings.

***Keywords:** Biblical hermeneutics, culture, Scripture, Ancient Near East, Greco-Roman world.*

### **Introduction**

The Bible remains essential in Christianity, even though it has been interpreted and applied across many cultures over the centuries. Biblical hermeneutics plays a significant role in helping believers understand Scripture in diverse cultural contexts. The relationship between the Bible and culture is complex, often leading to a dynamic interplay where culture influences interpretation. From the early Christian church to the present day, the Interpretation of the Bible has been shaped by the cultural settings in which it is read. In the early centuries, the Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman worlds influenced how key theological concepts like sin, salvation, and redemption were framed. As Christianity spread through Europe, Africa, and later into Asia and America, interpretations of Scripture often adapted to local customs, languages, and worldviews. This has been especially true in regions such as Africa, where Christian missionaries presented the Bible through a Western cultural lens, leading to mixed responses.

Within this developing conversation, biblical interpreters have debated how to maintain the best loyalty to the original meaning of the biblical text while still making it applicable to diverse cultures. This tension continues to shape hermeneutical methods today, particularly in areas where Christianity is growing rapidly, such as Sub-Saharan Africa. The paper addresses the challenge of maintaining sound Biblical hermeneutics amidst cultural influences that distort or reshape the original message of Scripture. In some cases, cultural contexts have shaped biblical interpretations to the extent that they deviate significantly from the intended meaning, leading to theological misinterpretations or applications that may need to align with core biblical principles. On the other

hand, cultural sensitivity is crucial to ensure that the message of Scripture is relevant and accessible to different peoples and communities. The challenge is upholding biblical truth's integrity while ensuring it is applied meaningfully and appropriately in diverse cultural contexts. This paper explores the challenges of cultural influences on biblical interpretation. It outlines critical principles that can guide hermeneutics, ensuring that interpretations remain faithful to Scripture and relevant in varying cultural contexts. This paper argues that maintaining sound Biblical hermeneutics requires a balance between loyalty to the original meaning of Scripture and sensitivity to cultural contexts, using established interpretive principles that safeguard against cultural distortions while enabling meaningful application across diverse settings.

This paper will employ an analytic method to achieve its goal; this will be possible through literature review of relevant theological and hermeneutical works to analyze how cultural influences have historically shaped biblical interpretation. Furthermore, the paper will propose principles drawn from traditional hermeneutical methods and contemporary theological scholarship that can help mitigate the influence of cultural bias on biblical interpretation.

### Conceptual Clarification

Etymologically, hermeneutics comes from the Greek *hermeneien*, meaning “to interpret.” It is derived from Hermes, who is the messenger between the gods and human beings in Greek mythology. In this process, Hermes delivers the message of the gods, which otherwise is not intelligible to humans; his task is to explain the decisions of the gods to the humans. In Lystra, Paul was taken for Hermes (Acts 14:12) for being the spokesman after the healing of the disabled man, and Barnabas was referred to as Zeus, the chief god of the Greek pantheon.

Biblical Hermeneutics is a theological task because it involves the direct interpretation of the Word of God.<sup>1</sup> Emiola Nihilola submits that “Biblical Hermeneutics is critical not only as a theological exercise and discipline but also for effective Christian ministry. In Protestantism, the ministry of the Word of God is the central function of the minister.”<sup>2</sup> In a broader sense, hermeneutics is the quest for meaning. In this broader context, the word hermeneutic has three meanings:<sup>3</sup> First is interpretation by speech, where the language expresses and interprets what is in one’s mind or even what constitutes one’s identity, being, and person. In biblical discussion, we have to deal with the capacity of human language to express God’s mind, will, and person. Second, interpretation through translation, where the process of translation from one language to another is a process that goes beyond the mechanical equivalents of words. It is concerned with the transference from one culture and worldview to another. This can also be a translation from unintelligible to intelligible language. Third, interpretation by commentary and explanation is a more formal aspect. Here, the interpreter gives systematic comments and explanations of the texts. Going further, Nihilola submits that.

Biblical Hermeneutics began in the Bible itself. Interpretation is involved any time an earlier tradition or writing is reviewed from the standpoint of a later one. During the Ezra – Nehemiah reform, Ezra read the law (referring most likely to the Pentateuch) for about six hours to the Israelites. The entire process involved in trying to help the Israelites live by the law of God is summarised in verse 8. They read from the Book of the Law of God,

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<sup>1</sup> Emiola Nihilola, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Lagos: National Open University of Nigeria, 2006), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Nihilola, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Biblical Hermeneutics*, eds. Joseph Palmpany et al. (Kerala: Alpha Institute of Theology and Science, 2020), 5-6.

making it clear and giving meaning so that the people could understand what has been read.<sup>4</sup>

Hermeneutics provides the tools necessary to mine God's self-disclosure, the sacred Scripture. Sound biblical hermeneutics, applied adequately by grace and the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit, guide and drive the interpreter into understanding what God has said.<sup>5</sup> "The greatest ministry responsibility is the ministry of the Word of God to the congregation. Preaching must be centred in interpreting and applying the Holy Scriptures."<sup>6</sup>

Culture comprises the group's beliefs, values, customs, and practices. It includes language, religion, social habits, art, and music. These elements help people define who they are and how they relate to others. It is passed down from one generation to the next, shaping how people behave and interact with each other.<sup>7</sup> It is integral to human existence, shaping our worldviews, values, and behaviours. It is no surprise that culture also influences how we interpret the Bible. From the early church to the modern era, cultural contexts have significantly impacted how Biblical texts are understood. There are two main types of culture: material and non-material. Material culture includes physical objects like clothing, tools, and buildings. Non-material culture, on the other hand, covers intangible things such as beliefs, values, and traditions.<sup>8</sup> Culture also shapes personal and group identities; it influences how people see themselves, express their emotions, and understand the world. It gives a sense of belonging and pride.<sup>9</sup>

## Methodology

This paper employed an analytical approach aimed at exploring the relationship between cultural dynamics and biblical interpretation. This approach is well-suited for the topic, as it allows for a thorough examination of how different cultural contexts have influenced the reading and understanding of the Bible, particularly within the African context. The author utilizes a literature review as a foundational step, engaging with a wide array of theological, historical, and hermeneutical sources. These sources include both classic and contemporary works that provide insights into the way biblical interpretation has developed, taking into account the cultural frameworks in which the Bible has been read over the centuries. The literature review covers both African and non-African perspectives to offer a balanced view of the broader impact of culture on biblical hermeneutics, ensuring that the analysis is both comprehensive and contextualized.

In this phase, the study assesses how cultural influences have historically shaped biblical interpretation, particularly focusing on how the Bible, as a text rooted in the Ancient Near East and Greco-Roman cultures, has been interpreted in various non-Western settings, especially in Africa. The review also considers how Western theological traditions, often transmitted through missionary activity, have interacted with indigenous African cultural norms, leading to unique interpretative outcomes. Through this analysis, the study identifies the key cultural elements—such as language, oral traditions, communal living, and religious practices—that shape the

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<sup>4</sup> Nihilola, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Jason S. Sexton, *Emerging Church Hermeneutics and the Historical-Grammatical Method*, *Southwestern Journal of Theology* · Volume 53 · Number 2 Spring 2011 (154-174).

<sup>6</sup> Bernard L. Rahmm, "Biblical Interpretation" *Baker's Handbook of Practical Theology* ed. by Ralph G. Turnbull (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1967), 100.

<sup>7</sup> A. L. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 18.

<sup>8</sup> G. Ferraro and S. Andreatta, *Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective*, 10th ed. (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2016), 56.

<sup>9</sup> S. Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. J. Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 223.

understanding of biblical texts in different African societies. This analytical methodology provides a well-rounded approach to studying the complex relationship between the Bible and culture, particularly in the African context. It not only highlights the challenges of interpreting the Bible across cultures but also offers practical solutions for overcoming these challenges, making the Bible relevant to diverse audiences while remaining faithful to its original message. This methodological framework features the importance of both historical reliability and contemporary relevance in biblical hermeneutics.

Finally, the paper proposes hermeneutical principles aimed at modifying cultural biases that might distort the interpretation of biblical texts. These principles are derived from both traditional hermeneutical methods—such as the historical-critical method, which emphasizes understanding the original context and meaning of the biblical text—and contemporary theological scholarship, which takes into account the need for contextualization in non-Western settings. The paper advocates for a balanced approach that respects the cultural context of both the biblical text and the modern interpreter, while also safeguarding the core theological messages of the Bible from being overshadowed by cultural norms that may conflict with biblical teachings. This involves identifying which cultural elements are specific to the ancient world and which are universal, transcending time and culture. The proposed principles guide interpreters in recognizing and navigating the interplay between their own cultural background and the original cultural setting of the biblical text, helping to ensure a sound and faithful reading and interpreting of Scripture.

### **Nature of the Bible**

The Bible is a sacred and historical text deeply connected with various aspects of human culture and spirituality. In Africa, the Bible has significantly shaped the continent's moral, cultural, and spiritual settings. The Bible's nature expresses divine revelation, artistic expressions, contextual relevance, the universal principles it conveys, and its influence on morality and ethics. These will be discussed from an African purview.

**Divine Revelation:** The Bible is regarded as the Divine Revelation of God's will and nature to humanity. It is described as "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16), meaning that God inspired human authors through the Holy Spirit. Wayne Grudem affirms that "the belief in divine revelation affirms that the Bible transcends human wisdom, conveying truths about God's nature, human purpose, and the way to salvation."<sup>10</sup> In African Christian theology, divine revelation has a profound significance. John Mbiti accepts the centrality of the Bible as the Word of God, emphasizing that it is the ultimate authority in African Christianity, guiding not only spiritual life but also moral and communal decisions.<sup>11</sup> Mbiti further argues that through the Bible, God speaks directly to the African context, addressing the historical and existential realities of the African people.<sup>12</sup> Also, Bolaji Idowu asserts that the Bible must be understood as both the revealed Word of God and as a living document that interacts with African traditional values.<sup>13</sup> This divine-human encounter in the Bible allows African Christians to see God as transcendent and immanent within their daily experiences and communal life.

**Cultural Expression:** While the Bible is divinely inspired, it is also a product of specific historical and cultural contexts. For example, the Old Testament shows Ancient Near Eastern

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<sup>10</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 73-75.

<sup>11</sup> John Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 10-12.

<sup>12</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 22-25.

<sup>13</sup> Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 47-50.

cultural elements, such as covenants, legal codes, and temple worship.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the New Testament exhibits features of Greco-Roman society, including political structures and Hellenistic influences.<sup>15</sup> Kwame Bediako argues that the Bible uniquely speaks to Africa because of the cultural similarities between the biblical world and traditional African societies.<sup>16</sup> For example, the concept of covenant, central to both Old Testament theology and African traditional religions, reflects a similar understanding of the relationship between the divine and the people. Kwame Bediako further emphasises that the Bible should not be seen as a foreign text imposed by Western civilisation but as a document that resonates deeply with African cultural realities.<sup>17</sup> He points out that themes such as community, kinship, and justice, foundational to African societies, find substantial equivalents in biblical narratives. Similarly, the emphasis on oral tradition in African cultures aligns with transmitting biblical stories before they were written.<sup>18</sup> In African Christianity, cultural expressions such as music, dance, and oral storytelling are employed to interpret and contextualise biblical messages. As Laurenti Magesa notes, African Christians have reimagined the Bible through their cultural lenses, integrating elements of African spirituality with biblical teachings.<sup>19</sup>

**Cultural Context:** The Bible did not exist in a vacuum but was written in a context, and understanding the cultural context of the Bible is essential for accurate interpretation in an African setting. African scholars have highlighted the need to approach the Bible with a hermeneutic that considers the Ancient Near Eastern context and the reader's contemporary African context. Gerald West asserts that contextual Bible study is critical in Africa, where readers engage the text through their lived experiences of poverty, oppression, and liberation.<sup>20</sup> West emphasises that African readers often see parallels between the social realities of the Bible and their contexts. For example, the Exodus story, where God liberates the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, resonates strongly in African societies with histories of colonisation and the struggle for independence.<sup>21</sup> This contextual reading allows African Christians to find hope and empowerment in the Bible as they navigate contemporary challenges. Also, Teresa Okure argues that the African context must shape how we interpret biblical narratives, particularly about issues of gender, power, and community.<sup>22</sup> She calls for a rereading of the Bible that challenges patriarchal structures that marginalise groups within African societies, such as women and children.

**Universal Principles:** Though the Bible is rooted in specific cultural and historical contexts, it conveys universal principles that transcend time and geography. Charles Nyamiti emphasises that "these universal principles must be understood within the framework of African communal ethics."<sup>23</sup> In African thought, the concept of ubuntu, which means "I am because we are, and we are because I am", resonates with the Bible's call for mutual care, love, and responsibility towards one another (Galatians 6:2). Nyamiti argues that the biblical emphasis on

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<sup>14</sup> John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 83-84.

<sup>15</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 8-10.

<sup>16</sup> Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997), 115-120.

<sup>17</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture on Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 90-92.

<sup>18</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 63-65.

<sup>19</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 45-48.

<sup>20</sup> Gerald West, *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 85-87.

<sup>21</sup> Gerald West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 22-25.

<sup>22</sup> Teresa Okure, *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 15-20.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Nyamiti, *Studies in African Christian Theology* (Nairobi: Catholic University of Eastern Africa Press, 1996), 37-39.

community life, justice, and reconciliation supports the African ideas of communal solidarity and interdependence.<sup>24</sup> John S. Pobee also highlights how African Christians interpret biblical principles of justice and mercy in ways that emphasise social responsibility. John S. Pobee notes that the Bible's concern for the poor, marginalised, and oppressed (Matthew 25:31-46) is particularly relevant in African contexts, where poverty and inequality remain significant social challenges.<sup>25</sup>

***Influence on Morality and Ethics:*** The Bible has profoundly influenced morality and ethics in African societies. Its teachings provide moral guidelines for personal behaviour and social justice. The Bible is not just a spiritual text but also a moral compass for African communities. The Decalogue, for instance, are seen as foundational to the development of African Christian ethics. Benezet Bujo argues that biblical ethics must be contextualised to fit African communal life, where moral behaviour is often evaluated in terms of its impact on the community rather than the individual.<sup>26</sup> Bujo insists that African Christian ethics promote harmony, peace, and justice in personal and societal relations, which aligns with biblical teachings.<sup>27</sup> Archbishop Desmond Tutu popularly used the Bible to advocate for justice, equality, and reconciliation during and after apartheid in South Africa, demonstrating its enduring relevance in shaping African ethics.<sup>28</sup> The Bible remains relevant in shaping the morality and ethics of Africans.

### **Interplay Between the Bible and Culture**

Ernest M. Ezeogu acknowledges two models of the relationship between the Bible and Culture: the dialectical and dialogical. He asserts that,

According to the dialectic model, gospel and culture are opposed, in perpetual conflict, and ultimately irreconcilable. This polarity is often expressed in the language of contrasting spatial, temporal and circumstantial metaphors, such as the gospel is from “above”, culture from “below”; the gospel is “divine”, culture “human”; the gospel is “light”, culture “darkness”; the gospel is “eternal”, culture “time-bound”; and so on. According to the advocates of this view, the dichotomy between the gospel and culture can be resolved only by culture yielding to the gospel's demands. This contrasts with the dialogic model, which views culture and gospel as compatible entities that could and should be reconciled. According to this view, culture and gospel could blend harmoniously. Such a dialogue would result in their mutual enrichment and efficiency.<sup>29</sup>

The relationship between the Bible and culture is a complex and dynamic interplay that has evolved over centuries. The Bible, as a sacred text, is not only rooted in specific historical and cultural contexts but also interacts with the diverse cultures of its readers, influencing and being influenced by those cultural settings. Understanding this relationship is crucial for sound biblical interpretation, particularly in non-Western contexts like Africa, where indigenous cultural practices and worldviews shape how the Bible is read and applied.

***The Bible as a Cultural Product:*** The Bible emerged from the Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman cultural worlds, and its content reflects the customs, social structures, languages,

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<sup>24</sup> Nyamiti, *Studies in African Christian Theology*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 55-58.

<sup>26</sup> Benezet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 65-67.

<sup>27</sup> Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, 66.

<sup>28</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 22-24.

<sup>29</sup> Ernest M. Ezeogu, “Bible and Culture in African Christianity” in *International Review Of Mission*, Vol.Lxxxvii, No 344 (28).

and worldviews of those ancient societies. For instance, biblical laws, narratives, and theological concepts are shaped by the cultures in which the texts were written. The concept of covenant in the Old Testament, for example, mirrors the covenantal agreements in Ancient Near Eastern societies, while the teachings of Paul in the New Testament are often framed within the political and philosophical context of the Greco-Roman world.

***The Bible in Various Cultural Contexts:*** As Christianity spread, the Bible was translated, interpreted, and applied in vastly different cultural contexts. When missionaries brought the Bible to Africa, it was often presented through a Western cultural lens, leading to both acceptance and resistance. Indigenous peoples adapted biblical teachings to their own worldviews, creating a unique interplay between Scripture and local customs. This process often involved reinterpreting biblical narratives in ways that resonated with the experiences of local communities. In Africa, for example, themes of liberation, community, and justice in the Bible have been emphasized, especially in light of histories of colonialism and oppression.

***Cultural Influence on Biblical Interpretation:*** Culture deeply influences how biblical texts are understood. Language, traditions, values, and worldviews all shape the interpretive lens through which Scripture is read. In many African contexts, for example, the oral tradition and communal ethos shape the way biblical stories are shared and applied. African readers may interpret biblical passages differently from their Western counterparts due to differences in cultural experiences and spiritual outlooks. For instance, the Exodus narrative has often been interpreted in Africa as a symbol of liberation from colonial oppression, highlighting the Bible's relevance to contemporary struggles for justice.

***The Bible's Role in Shaping Culture:*** While culture influences the way the Bible is interpreted, the Bible also plays a significant role in shaping culture. Throughout history, the Bible has been a source of moral and ethical guidance, influencing laws, social practices, and worldviews in many cultures. In Africa, the Bible has shaped moral frameworks, particularly regarding community life, family structure, and social justice. African theologians often emphasize how biblical principles of love, justice, and reconciliation align with traditional African values such as ubuntu—the idea that one's humanity is interconnected with others. The Bible has also played a role in social and political movements. For instance, in the fight against apartheid in South Africa, leaders like Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak drew upon biblical themes of justice and liberation to advocate for freedom and equality. In such contexts, the Bible becomes a tool for social transformation, guiding communities toward justice and ethical living.

***The Interplay of Bible and Culture in Hermeneutics:*** In biblical hermeneutics, understanding the cultural context of both the biblical text and the modern interpreter is essential. A balanced hermeneutical approach involves discerning which aspects of the Bible are culturally specific to its original context and which teachings are universal and transcend cultural boundaries. For example, while certain laws in the Old Testament were specific to ancient Israelite society, the broader principles of justice and mercy are applicable across cultures. Scholars like Kwame Bediako and John Mbiti have argued for a contextualized biblical hermeneutic that respects both the original cultural setting of the Bible and the contemporary cultural context of its readers. This approach enables interpreters to apply the Bible in ways that are faithful to its message while making it relevant to the specific needs and challenges of modern cultures, particularly in African settings.

The relationship between the Bible and culture is marked by a reciprocal influence, where the Bible shapes cultural values and practices while being interpreted through cultural lenses. This dynamic interplay calls for careful and contextualized hermeneutics that respect both the original

intent of Scripture and the contemporary cultural realities of its readers. In African contexts, this relationship is particularly vibrant, as biblical teachings are interpreted through the rich cultural traditions of African societies, leading to a unique and transformative reading of Scripture.

In Africa, the interaction between the Bible and culture is essential for sound biblical interpretation. Mbiti emphasises that Christianity in Africa must resonate with the people's cultural heritage. According to Mbiti, African spirituality is deeply rooted in communal values, rituals, and oral traditions, and these must be acknowledged when interpreting Scripture.<sup>30</sup> For example, African tradition respects elders, which informs interpretations of biblical teachings on honour and respect (Exodus 20:12). In contrast, the communal life of African societies expresses the early church's communal sharing (Acts 4:32-35).<sup>31</sup> This interplay encourages a reading of the Bible that is culturally sensitive and relevant to African realities. A sound and unbiased interplay between the Bible and the African culture keeps in mind the following:

**Balance Tradition and Morality:** Balancing tradition and morality within African Christianity requires careful negotiation between inherited cultural values and biblical principles. Bediako pointed out, "Christianity in Africa cannot be a mere transplantation of Western Christianity; it must engage with African moral systems that are already in place."<sup>32</sup> This involves balancing respect for traditional moral values, such as community and hospitality, with biblical ethics that may sometimes challenge certain practices, like polygamy or gender roles.<sup>33</sup> John Mbiti's analysis of African traditional religions shows that these cultures already have deeply fixed moral systems that resonate with biblical ethics, such as the sanctity of life and social justice.<sup>34</sup> However, the challenge lies in navigating moral dilemmas where African traditions contradict biblical teachings. For instance, while African traditions highly regard the extended family system, the Bible's call for personal accountability challenges excessive reliance on collective identity.<sup>35</sup>

**Contextual Theology:** Contextual theology is a mark of African Christian thought. Mercy Amba Oduyoye argues that theology must address the experiences of African people, particularly the challenges of poverty, gender inequality, and post-colonial struggles.<sup>36</sup> Bediako also advocates for a theology that does not simply import Western ideas but grows out of the African context. He calls for an incarnational theology where Jesus is seen not only as the Christ of Western traditions but as the Christ who is present in African suffering, liberation, and cultural expressions.<sup>37</sup> This contextual theology is not about altering biblical truth but about applying it in a way that speaks to the realities of African life.

**Cultural Shift:** Cultural shifts are occurring rapidly across African societies, posing challenges and opportunities for African Christianity. As urbanisation, globalisation, and technological advancements reshape African life, churches must reconsider how they engage with these changes. Emmanuel Katongole points out that the rise of Pentecostalism in Africa can respond to these cultural shifts, particularly as people move to cities and seek new forms of religious expression that meet their spiritual and social needs.<sup>38</sup> Katongole also explores how

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<sup>30</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 201-204.

<sup>31</sup> Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 98-102.

<sup>32</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 31-34.

<sup>33</sup> J.N.K. Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003), 43-48.

<sup>34</sup> John Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 123-127.

<sup>35</sup> Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 25-29.

<sup>36</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 9-11.

<sup>37</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Regnum Africa, 2000), 18-22.

<sup>38</sup> Emmanuel Katongole, *Mirror to the Church: Resurrecting Faith after Genocide in Rwanda* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 14-18.

African Christianity must address modern socio-political issues, including corruption, economic inequality, and environmental degradation.<sup>39</sup> In response to these cultural shifts, it is argued that the church must adapt to new realities and serve as a prophetic voice to critique harmful cultural trends.<sup>40</sup>

***Social Justice and Biblical Ethics:*** Social justice is central to African theology, where the Bible is seen as a powerful resource for addressing issues of poverty, oppression, and inequality. African liberation theologians like Allan Boesak have emphasised that the gospel is inherently political and calls for justice for the poor and marginalised.<sup>41</sup> Boesak's reading of Exodus as a narrative of liberation resonates deeply within African contexts where colonialism, apartheid, and other forms of oppression have left lasting scars.<sup>42</sup> In the South African context, Desmond Tutu's application of biblical ethics to the anti-apartheid struggle illustrates how biblical teachings can inspire movements for social change.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the Bible calls for a care of creation that supports traditional African views of the earth as sacred and communal property.<sup>44</sup> In this sense, biblical ethics on stewardship and justice are applied to address Africa's social and environmental crises.

### **Challenges of Cultural Influence**

However, this interaction between the Bible and culture can also pose challenges. Cultural biases can distort the interpretation of biblical texts, leading to misunderstandings or misapplications. For instance, syncretism, where biblical teachings are blended with local religious practices, can dilute or alter the original message of Scripture. At the same time, rigidly applying the Bible without considering cultural context can result in the imposition of foreign values that may not resonate with the local culture. In contemporary times, the influence of culture on biblical interpretation is even more pronounced. Different cultures approach the Bible with their assumptions, leading to diverse interpretations. For example, African, Asian, and Latin American theologians often emphasise aspects of the Bible that resonate with their cultural experiences, such as themes of liberation, community, and spiritual warfare. The most prominent focus in this section will be on African scholars and their contributions to addressing the challenges of cultural influences. John Samuel Mbiti himself articulated the problem as follows:

Even though attempts are made to give Christianity an African character, its Western form is, in many ways, foreign to African peoples. This foreignness is a drawback because it means that Christianity is kept on the surface and is not accessible to deepen its influence in all areas of African life and problems.<sup>45</sup>

Mbiti argues that the gospel handed down to Africans by the European missionaries carries some form of Western embellishments that is a hindrance to the African community regarding the interpretation of the Bible. He sees such cultural imposition as a pitfall to the gospel message brought to Africa. Mbiti's submission presupposes that African culture is a worthy tool for interpreting the Bible, especially in an African context, which Africans best witness and

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<sup>39</sup> Emmanuel Katongole, *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace: Theological Perspectives* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013), 67-72.

<sup>40</sup> Katongole, *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace: Theological Perspectives*, 69.

<sup>41</sup> Allan Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence: A Socio-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Power* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1976), 89-93.

<sup>42</sup> Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), 110-115.

<sup>43</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Image Books, 1999), 33-39.

<sup>44</sup> Kenale Mang Jacqueline Mongwe, *Eco-Theology in African Perspective* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2019), 15-18.

<sup>45</sup> John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1975), 185.

understand. While culture can enrich our understanding of the Bible, it poses significant challenges. One of the main pitfalls is the risk of cultural relativism, where the authority of Scripture is questioned by culture.<sup>46</sup> This can lead to interpretations that reflect more of the interpreter's cultural context than the intended meaning of the Biblical text. Another challenge is the potential for syncretism, where Biblical teachings are blended with practices that compromise the gospel's integrity. Douglas L. Rutt submits that the danger of syncretism is one of the most significant missiological issues facing the church as it expands worldwide.<sup>47</sup> This has been a concern in various mission contexts where local customs and beliefs are integrated into Christian practice without sufficient discernment. Syncretism is one of the major threats against biblical authority. Syncretism occurs when Bible interpreters consciously or unconsciously accommodate structures, beliefs, and practices so that Christianity loses its distinctiveness and speaks with a voice reflective of its culture.<sup>48</sup>

Jackson Wu observes two forms of syncretism that are ravaging the essence of the church: cultural and theological syncretism. Cultural syncretism is when the church's teaching and practice reflect cultural values more than the Bible, while theological syncretism is more than merely having a theological bias. Instead, theological syncretism occurs when the interpreter's subculture's priorities, questions, and assumptions are read into the Bible and mute its message.<sup>49</sup> This is more understood as eisegesis.

### **Principles of Sound Biblical Hermeneutics**

It is essential to adhere to sound hermeneutical principles to navigate these challenges. The first principle is the historical-grammatical method, which emphasises understanding the text's original meaning by considering its historical and literary context. This approach helps to anchor interpretation in the author's intended message rather than the interpreter's cultural biases. The historical-grammatical method is the established hermeneutical method of evangelicals.<sup>50</sup> Jason S. Sexton highlights four principles that are worthy of note in establishing an understanding of hermeneutics with the historical-grammatical method, which are: firstly, pre-understanding as a variable starting point; secondly, scriptural ambiguity; thirdly, authoritative community; fourthly, personal and contextual influence.<sup>51</sup>

The second principle is the use of original languages. Understanding the shades of Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic can prevent misinterpretations that arise from cultural misunderstandings. For instance, certain words or phrases in the original languages may have connotations lost in translation, leading to tilted interpretations when read through a contemporary cultural lens. The third principle is contextualisation; it is crucial to interpret the Bible in context, both within the immediate passage and within the broader Biblical narrative. Isolating verses from their context leads to culturally appealing interpretations but theologically unsound. For example, the prosperity

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<sup>46</sup> The Bible is authoritative because it is inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20—21). Since the Bible is supremely authoritative, people argue that Scripture must take priority over culture. Daniel Sanchez's voice amplifies this concept by saying, "First, the Bible must be the final authority in the contextualization process and not merely a partner or a subservient source in the development of human ideologies or syncretistic doctrines. Culture and cultural items must be judged by Scripture, not Scripture by culture." See Daniel R. Sanchez, "Contextualization and the Missionary Endeavor," in *Missiology*, ed. John Mark Terry, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2015), 294.

<sup>47</sup> Douglas L. Rutt, "Translation and Syncretism" *Concordia Journal Spring 2023* (17-31).

<sup>48</sup> Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Contextualization and Syncretism," *Missiological Reflection* 38 (blog), Missio Dei Foundation, January 1, 2011, <http://www.missiology.com/blog/GVR-MR-38-Contextualization-and-Syncretism/acceted> on September 17 2024.

<sup>49</sup> Jackson Wu, "The Doctrine of Scripture and Biblical Contextualization: Inspiration, Authority, Inerrancy, and the Canon," *Themelios* 44.2 (2019): 312-26

<sup>50</sup> Sexton, *Emerging Church Hermeneutics and the Historical-Grammatical Method*, (154-174).

<sup>51</sup> Sexton, *Emerging Church Hermeneutics and the Historical-Grammatical Method*, (154-174).

gospel, popular in some cultural contexts, often relies on verses taken out of context to promote a message inconsistent with the overall teaching of Scripture. Lying deep at the heart of contextualisation is the ability to communicate the message of the wonders of God into the languages of people without altering the text's original meaning.<sup>52</sup> It readily appears that faithfully moving the message from one context or language to another is fraught with challenges and pitfalls.<sup>53</sup> Wu submits that,

By its very nature, the Bible illustrates how a transcendent God conveys truth within concrete historical contexts. The words, imagery, concepts, and arguments presented in Scripture reflect the writers' varied backgrounds, assumptions, and cultural milieus. In that sense, all propositional truth claims are rooted in some cultural context. No biblical text is expressed in a culture-free manner, independent of time and place.<sup>54</sup>

The fourth principle is Humility in Interpretation; Laurenti Magesa stresses the importance of humility in biblical interpretation. Magesa warns against the arrogance of interpreting the Bible through a purely Western lens, arguing that African Christians must approach Scripture openly to African spiritual traditions and experiences.<sup>55</sup> He contends that humility involves recognising that no single culture can exhaust the meaning of the Bible and that African cultures offer unique insights into the text. In ecumenical dialogue, Pobee has advocated for humility in interpretation by encouraging African and Western Christians to learn from one another.<sup>56</sup> This approach promotes mutual respect and openness because the gospel speaks differently in different contexts. Humility, in this regard, allows for a richer, more diverse understanding of God's Word, one that transcends cultural boundaries while affirming the unique contributions of African Christianity.

## Conclusion

The interplay between the Bible and culture is a complex and dynamic process that requires careful navigation to maintain sound Biblical hermeneutics. While culture can enrich our understanding of Scripture, it also poses significant challenges that must be addressed through adherence to sound hermeneutical principles. Sound biblical hermeneutics offers an opportunity for a richer, more diversified understanding of the Bible, but it requires discernment and a commitment to Biblical truth. Finally, the guidance of the Holy Spirit enables believers to faithfully interpret and apply the Scriptures in a way that transcends cultural boundaries.

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<sup>52</sup> Douglas L. Rutt, "Translation and Syncretism" *Concordia Journal Spring*, 2023 (21)

<sup>53</sup> Rutt, "Translation and Syncretism" 22

<sup>54</sup> Jackson Wu, The Doctrine of Scripture and Biblical Contextualization: Inspiration, Authority, Inerrancy, and the Canon *Themelios* 44.2 (2019): 312-26

<sup>55</sup> Laurenti Magesa, *What is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013), 45-50.

<sup>56</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 91-95.

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